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First Steps for Addressing Speech and Language Problems

Identifying a Possible Problem

Spoken communication is the way that a lot of learning takes place, whether in the classroom, on the playground, or at home. So speech and language problems can interfere with many aspects of your child's learning and development. In addition, problems with oral language can be an early signal that a child will struggle with reading and writing. For both these reasons, early identification and treatment of speech and language problems is very important.

Your child's teacher may be the first to observe that your child's speaking or listening skills are not at the level expected for kids his age. The teacher may notice that your child has trouble responding aloud to her questions about a story he has just heard, or following her spoken instructions for classroom assignments.

A teacher's observations may confirm your own sense that your child has more difficulty than other kids his age expressing himself in words. When he speaks, he may struggle to express his thoughts fluently. When he describes an event or object, he may fill in with words like "stuff" or "thing" because he has trouble finding the exact word he's looking for. He may seem inattentive when you speak to him, or to only hear parts of what you say.

Evaluating the Problem

When a child has oral language problems — with speaking or listening — a speech and language therapist can diagnose the child's specific problems and help build needed skills. Whether your child is assessed through your public school or by a private practitioner, the speech and language therapist will likely be one of several people who help put together a profile of your child's learning strengths and needs. Other members of the team may include your pediatrician, your child's teachers, or a psychologist (either at school or in private practice) who specializes in evaluating children with learning difficulties.

Evaluation by a speech and language specialist may include interviews with parents and teachers, classroom observations, and assessment of your child's oral and written communications skills. In some situations the specialist will work with classroom teachers to develop remediation strategies for your child. The broad categories used by most speech and language specialists to evaluate a child are:

- **Expressive language** — A child's ability to communicate with other people, through speaking or writing.
- **Receptive language** — A child's understanding of the information he receives through spoken or written communication.
- **Articulation** — A child's ability to pronounce words correctly.

A common first step in identifying a speech or language problem is to rule out other possible causes for the behaviors you or your child's teacher observe. Your pediatrician can evaluate your child's